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THE DARDANELLES*

BY LIEUTENANT JEAN GIRAUDOUX

To our right Marmora fell away; to our left the Gulf of Saros seemed to climb. On this peninsula which thrusts itself like the bow of a boat between the rising and the falling sea, we lay one close against the other, asleep. My neighbors were the twin brothers; if I woke I could comfort myself with the thought that all Frenchmen are alike. War then appeared an anodyne; it was enough that one of us should be saved, just one; and when I shut my eyes again there also came to me, came and calmed me, the thought of an only child, of one wife. France in her remoteness made herself simple, to give one for a moment the sleep of primitive man. Then suddenly the same guilty hand lighted all at the same time, each on its own continent, sunrise, daybreak—and towards Armenia—the cold dawn. The stars dwindled. Two silver olive trees—it always happens on the movie screen—were stirring and shivering between the lines the tatters of an immortal foliage. Then the sun rose.

It rose just below us, under our caps, under our knapsacks, and I knew after that what each one of my men would have done had he received the sun itself as a gift. Baltesse kneaded it, rolled it in his hands; Riotard put it on his head, balanced it, catching it when it bounced off. A carmine sun which set everything on fire, and pricked our staring eyes till they suddenly seemed projections of its own rays. A lark, attracted by the glitter of our arms and our kits came soaring over the trench, following every traverse, every salient. Over in the Turkish lines they would only have had to draw its flight to know our shelter, and especially to mark those

*Translated by Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant.

Frenchmen—the worst enemies of the Prophet—who use a mirror. On the coast of Asia one color was laid on after another, and my corporal from the Beaux Arts shouted and protested when the same one reappeared. Every black rock, every gold-bordered cypress, was no more than a thick blurred mass, choking up one of the springs of day. Little by little a light that was heavier than water fell into the depths of the Strait; you could see mosques balanced on their minarets, plane-trees turned upside down, hour-glasses to measure times and seasons: you understood the Orient. . . . But by this time the people who rise early had begun to attack on the left, and some Sidney regiments, surprising the Kurds, were exterminating them without quarter, because the Turk is the national enemy of the Australian.

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Relief. At the junction of the Anglo-French line the *liaison* officers had stopped exchanging postage-stamps, and without this gummed paper there was danger of their losing contact again. We went down over the hills, jostling Barbaras and Peuls in the corridors; creatures with inglorious eyes, poor, blurred and dulled images of ourselves—for our major-general, a clever strategist, kept his white soldiers on duty at night, his negroes by day. All the brilliance, all the emptiness, which the greatest poets in our country only suspect when they lie on their backs in the middle of a rolling field, these were ours here in our boyau. Miserable soldiers that we were, three months ago in France, to have to go off on patrol duty and risk death just to see the tip of a church tower between two clods of earth! Along the flanks of the peninsula below us the sea etched those parallel lines that it only takes in good maps. We went on again, raising the sun to the level of our arms by a single downward stride. For those who do not care to see a whole continent the first thing in the morning, there were islands. In the purple gulf, English ships; in the Straits, French ones, which prefer golden waters. We recognized the *Henry IV*, with its back-slanting plank; the *Chateaurenaud*, riding at anchor, but flecked with imitation foam at the bow to make the Turkish artillery think she was speeding at thirty knots. The torpedo destroyers, which had come in as far as Yenikeui, were slowly drifting out again, stern foremost, instead of turning. Far on the horizon Tenedos kept changing its place as we walked,

attaching itself now to one island, now to another, then floating clear again to follow Imbros or Samothrace. Between its olive hill and its cypress hill the camp was astir, and every bird, too, showed a dark wing and a light. From four solitary columns rose ring-doves, flying by threes, and jays, which flew in couples; as if Love, half awake at this early hour, were still confusing his symbols. Some cicadas, those born that very morning on the plain, where the olive-trees had all been cut, lifted themselves ambitiously to the height of the pines, found nothing, dropped then to the level of the olives, where they fell and died. We had now got within earshot of the African chasseurs, who had been anchored in the roads for a fortnight, and were blowing their trumpets steadily to quiet the restless horses on the deck.

The whole army was there, between slopes which were now bare of their young rye, and their barley, younger still; contained on a mere ten acres which Englishmen, on the way to bathe, crossed all day long with their towels, just as they used to step across France to Nice. The gold-brown mass in the distance was the too-white horses of the spahis, enamelled, by order, with permanganate; encamped at the mouth of the brook it was their right, as privileged beings, to drink all the water that came down to them. The zouave, with boxes on his head, was Colonel Nieger's orderly, on his way to the castle with Tanagra figurines that the sappers had found; whenever a shell came near him he stood perfectly still, like a Spanish toreador, who freezes into a statue when snuffed at by a bull. A New Zealander was painting his cannon in tiger-stripes to give it a more natural air. Some splendid aeroplanes were bringing the General Staff chickens from Tenedos.

All that the European war had rejected was here; all the people whom the engineers of the next century will exile and imprison on an island: scholars, madmen, sportsmen. There was the most famous of Irish entomologists, whom the Indians—brothers of the ant—arrested from time to time as a spy; war in the English sector was hard upon insects too. There were Creoles from the island of Reunion, whose poor circular gaze their adjutant sought in vain to lengthen on this long-drawn peninsula by always making them aim at Achi-Baba. There was the millionaire who had come with his nine hunters of Spanish wild goat. They were armed with giant spy-glasses, and used them lying flat on their backs, as

Moroccans use their guns—one of them always declared he could see snow. Nothing but volunteers, these men of Auvergne and Burgundy, who had always wanted to see Byzantium; simple souls whom one recognized at a glance to have been born before the age of lies. The taller were more romantic, the smaller more practical, the darker more passionate. There were Duparc and Garrigue—one square-built, with eyes that did not match, the other a giant with braided hair—archaic warriors, who in the siege operations of an earlier age had offered themselves to handle the ram. There were the two policemen from Béziers, who all day long prevented us from cutting wood or birds-nesting, under penalty of the law, and who after dark—always in the interest of the General Staff—pursued the forbidden sport of fishing with hand-grenades. There was Moréas, Toulouse Lautrec, Albala, who had never before been seen outside his Paris café. The Turks and the Greeks of the brigade, consulting together in a circular trench, were busy compiling the little dictionary that was to be so useful when we entered Constantinople, and could not agree either about the word “fox” or the word “immortal.” . . . They sometimes got up all together and demanded the Croix de Guerre.

We were having lunch. We had half a quart of wine, a leg of cold storage mutton, a sweet biscuit. Drunk and replete, we did not mind lending our fountain-pens to the comrades who were to attack to-morrow, and who were recopying—from inability to love better—the letters written before the last attack. Hoffman was playing his pocket-bugle in tears—he always wept as he played, otherwise it would have been the flute, which his lachrymose habit had obliged him to give up in his school days. Juéry was writing poetry, his head at the bottom of the trench, his feet against the parapet, so that quantities of the same letters rolled about inside him, and at the Dardanelles nothing came to him but alliterations. For our water spaniel, Garrigue collected tortoises, orange adders, scorpions; but presented the monsters one at a time, lest he should come to believe in a single too-powerful beast. The sacristan of the church of Sainte-Eugénie at Biarritz, who was to be the first to die, had already given himself a scratch with his gun, and for his sake they broke my first tube of iodine. I took advantage of it to hand out my laudanum. From that time on, all my good-bye presents were to be of service: there was nothing that could not answer some

purpose; the little pharmacopeia, the English flask, the purple and red blanket . . . all my friends had been useful to me. . . . I was cheating nobody's kindness. . . . I could die.

* * *

Midday. In each wave the sun and a whole jelly-fish. In each clod of earth a centipede clasping the day's hot centre in its rigidly curved feet. The wind was blowing from Russia and covered us with sand, all but our arms and legs, which we could shake. The Senegalese, taking their siesta in their hole edged with mosaics of pebbles, were doing what we do at midnight; turning, and groaning, and calling on their wise men. War was half asleep, and to spare her fist, was striking only things with a give to them: the sea, the ships—she was attacking the bobbing cistern boat with fury. The *Annam*, the mail boat, was burning in the roadstead, and blackened papers floated all the way up to us. The *Triumph* had been torpedoed, and was sinking; we could hear the crew, drawn up at attention on the deck, chanting her name. The Strait swelled between its two banks as if an enormous submarine were stealing down its centre. All the boats were whistling the alarm; all the sirens were screeching, and the ships, suddenly gone blind, manœuvred in the whirlwinds of light with more noise and cautiousness than in the thickest fog. Legionaries were firing volleys at the floating mines. Scarcely visible at the far end of the Gulf, the largest armored cruiser in the world was having an attack of nerves, and shrouded herself at intervals with a golden powder, as flowers throw out pollen at the approach of a noxious insect. Like children who have taken refuge inside an organ, our men slept on.

But now Affre, the judge, came back from the Cape, dripping with perspiration, and loaded with sweet lemons. He offered them to us with misplaced allusions—for even when he has the Dardanelles under his eyes he always confuses them with the Hesperides—and took us off to bathe. Picking our way over colonials, over legionaries, stretched out side by side—unable till we reached the shore to take a single step shorter or broader than a sleeping man—we came at last to Myrto. Then we went swimming, bumping negroes, who sank at our touch like good hippopotami. As our eyes were on the level of the water, all the shadow we

had left took refuge on our heads, and we had only to dive to get rid of it forever.

* * *

Thus we lived, without living too much, through flat and dazzling days; we felt ourselves minute points above the world's joy, and its sorrow; we did not dig our shelters either, because the water kept coming in. The little hump made by our writing case under our cloak—it varies in the European soldier as the heart varies among civilians—was always the same size with us, who had no interest in letters, scarcely visible at all. No vile or futile act could be even imagined; one was in plain sight from every side, and not a movement was permitted unless it was acceptable to ten different peoples. An inoffensive, careless world, like worlds of a single sex: without falsifying their story, historians may recount our exploits in the feminine gender, and let it be thought that the armies of the Dardanelles were armies of women. Fabulous evenings. The colonels, made languid by the burning heat, came to cool their hands in the current of the Strait, as in Brittany one goes to warm them in the Gulf Stream. A child of Miramas, the only offshoot of these hundred thousand warriors, went from company to company—a make-believe child—to be admired. The African soldiers were already slipping out of their holes toward the cemetery to steal the pebbles from the tombs and finish their mosaic design. The French, suddenly realizing how impossible it was that they shouldn't see the station of the P-L-M again, that there should not be any more jugged hare or Vouvray for them in this world, were reassured as to their fate and sang in chorus. Every one of their cheeses, too—Brie, Levroux, Cantal, was a promise of life; logically, if they reasoned it out, a promise of eternity. The Australians were smoking, with their shirt sleeves rolled up, not thinking of the future, mortal beings.

War! I hate him who loves you, and I hate him who detests you. The smoke of the kitchens came to us, but crouched in our burrow-like retreat in the depths of the golden sea we resisted their odor. War, why are you not a mere idea in our minds, or why are you not at most limited to a few isolated friends, to a few naked men, as you suddenly were this afternoon, when Jacques and I were coming

out of our bath and all the shells fell only on him and me? We could not reach our clothes; we fell to earth like wrestlers who know their strength, Jacques parallel to the tomb of Patroclus, I, parallel to Jacques; you obliged us to make all sorts of friendly geometrical figures to escape you. Then the irritated trajectories stupidly lengthened, and the shells left us to fall on the camp and wound Colomb, our lieutenant, and kill poor Coulomb, his orderly—for the simple folk who bear our names, or almost bear them, are killed in our stead.

* * *

Midnight. The frogs of the Turkish brook were replying to our frogs in their code language, and I only understood what had to do with the weather. . . . An Asian cannon, one millimeter smaller than the French one, made a furious attack upon it, and after this dilation grew peaceful again. Every man of us, sure of his death, got out his farewell letter and confided it to his right-hand neighbor, an immortal.

A day smooth and glossy as wax. What relief can I give to you, what other lonely evening, the evening of a young woman in France, shall I stamp upon you, so that our double soul, our double language may sometime be born again, and Paris, with its gliding taxis?

JEAN GIRAUDOUX.